Today

Course Concept (GN & PD)
Course Content (PD)
Plastic Sofas and Poodle Skirts

Because everything in her home is waterproof, the housewife of 2000 can do her daily cleaning with a hose.
Cyberspace: A world in which the global traffic of knowledge, secrets, measurements, indicators, entertainments, and alter-human agency takes on form: sights, sounds, presences never seen on the surface of the earth blossoming in a vast electronic night. . . . From vast databases that constitute the culture’s deposited wealth, every document is available, every recording is playable, and every picture is viewable. The realm of pure information, filling like a lake…

— Michael Benedikt, Introduction to *Cyberspace*, MIT Press, 1991
As access to the Web has widened, legitimate information has been subsumed by a deluge of vanity "home pages," corporate marketing gimmicks and trashy infomercials. Anyone who has ever used a search engine to find a specific piece of information on the Internet will cringe at the familiar litany of disappointment. It is impossible to know where information comes from, who has paid for it, whether it is reliable and whether you will ever be able to find it again. A student looking for information on the Internet about, say, World War II, cannot know whether a given "page" has been posted by a legitimate historian or by a Holocaust revisionist. Brian Hecht, "Net Loss," The New Republic, February 17, 1997
Cyberspace: The Morning After

[The Internet is] a place where crime is rampant and every twisted urge can be satisfied. Thousands of virtual streets are lined with casinos, porn shops, and drug dealers. Scam artists and terrorists skulk behind seemingly lawful Web sites. And cops wander through once in a while, mostly looking lost. It's the Strip in Las Vegas, the Red Light district in Amsterdam, and New York's Times Square at its worst, all rolled into one -- and all easily accessible from your living room couch.

"The Underground Web," Business Week, 9/2/02
Cyberspace: The Morning After

Cyberspace, to its early denizens, was supposed to be a prelapsarian world, ... full of sweetness and light and universal siblinghood. In fact, the story line was Genesis in reverse. Our troubles started when Eve ate the apple of knowledge. Now knowledge had accumulated to the point where it could undo the damage, reconstruct the apple (or Apple) and restore our innocence...

Well, have you visited cyberspace lately? Of course you have. And of course the Internet has vastly improved life for anyone likely to be reading this. But as a friendly place to hang out, give me meatspace any day. There is commerce aplenty, but that's not the problem. The happiest and most peaceful parts of the World Wide Web are the places where people are buying things. The nasty parts of the Web are where people are doing what the Founding Surfers intended: expressing themselves and forming communities. Why is the tone of conversation on the Internet, especially about politics, so much lower than in the material world?

Michael Kinsley, “Cybercreeps Run Amok,” *Washington Post*, 7/24/05
The Perils of Cyberspace: “Rotten Information”

Concerns over
- Pornography and graphic violence
- Racist and anti-Semitic sites, etc.
- Bomb-making and drug sites
- Pirated software and term papers for sale
- Scams and market manipulations
- Incivility
- Pseudonymous defamations ~ unsubstantiated rumor
- Porosity of institutional boundaries
- Threats to privacy

Reliability of information...
Growing Pains?

A bump in the road ahead?
Technology to the Rescue?

“The remedy for the abuse of digital technology is more digital technology.”

Computer technology generated the information explosion and will also be the key to taming it, with an innovation called hyper media. Hyper media could be to student research what the microwave oven is to cooking - a way to save time and trouble. Hyper media puts onto a computer disc entire books, pictures, audio and video tapes, census data, newspaper and magazine files. The innovation: everything is indexed. That eliminates the drudgery of library research, following threads of information from separate sources. … Hyper media may put the world at the command of the student.

*St Louis Post-Dispatch, 1/7/90*
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What if the baseball could repair the window?

The Internet caused the problem. It's only fitting it should also provide the solution.
The Varieties of Rottenness

What makes information rotten? Failures of:

- Reliability
- Authenticity
- Authoritativeness
- Quality
- “Civility” (the rules of civil society)

Where do we go to understand these notions?

How have these issues been dealt with in the past?

What are the institutional and educational challenges that RI poses? (“information literacy”)
What goes around...

Alexander Pope, *The Dunciad* (pub. 1742):
Hence Bards, like Proteus long in vain ty'd down,
Escape in Monsters, and amaze the town.
Hence Miscellanies spring, the weekly boast  
Of Curl's chaste press, and Lintot's rubric post:
Hence hymning Tyburn's elegiac lines,
Hence Journals, Medleys, Merc'ries, Magazines,
Sepulchral Lyes, our holy walls to grace,
And New-year Odes, and all the Grub-street race. (37-44)
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And while Mr. Reagan prospered in schools without libraries, I believe that the "information explosion" of more recent years has made school libraries necessary.

This is the information age! There is an information explosion. Some students will need a longer period of time to master mathematics, science, economics, world history...
According to one estimate, more new information has been cranked out in the last three decades than in the previous five millennia. The total amount of printed knowledge doubles every eight years. … The phrase "I read that somewhere, but I can't remember where" has become endemic. The result? Information anxiety, described as "the black hole between data and knowledge." The difference between the two: Data is the raw material, and is passive; information is active and, ideally at least, enlightening. As we thrash around in the over-abundance of the first, the second becomes ever more elusive.

*Washington Post, 2/3/89*
There is an incredible amount of information available through the Internet but finding something useful is a frustrating experience. The Internet allows you to access information on tens of millions of computers worldwide, and brings the prospect of a global repository of knowledge, mostly free...

While putting information out on to the Internet is easy, the problem is finding the right piece of information when you need it. And here is where we need new technologies to help us sift huge amounts of information…. finding a specific piece of data can be a mammoth chore. What is needed are specific tools that can carry out searches with a certain amount of artificial intelligence - an approach that takes into account the less focused aspects of conducting searches. Such tools are the key to unlocking the potential of the Internet.

Jacques Barzun, 1954: Something has happened in the last hundred years to change the relation of the written word to daily life. Whether it is the records we have to keep in every business and profession or the ceaseless communicating at a distance which modern transport and industry require, the world's work is now unmanageable, unthinkable, without literature. … A committee won't sit if its drivelings are not destined for print. Even an interoffice memo goes out in sixteen copies and the schoolchildren's compositions appear verbatim in a mimeographed magazine. [There is a] huge number of activities which (it would seem) exist only to bombard us with paper…
Aldous Huxley, 1934: Process reproduction and the rotary press have made possible the indefinite multiplication of writing and pictures. Universal education and relatively high wages have created an enormous public who know how to read and can afford to buy reading and pictorial matter. A great industry has been called into existence in order to supply these commodities. …The population of Western Europe has little more than doubled during the last century. But the amount of reading—and seeing—matter has increased, I should imagine, at least twenty and possibly fifty or even a hundred times.
The Information Explosion, Then and Now

Thomas Carlyle, 1840: Books are not only printed, but in a great measure written and sold by machinery…. Every little sect among us, Unitarians, Utilitarians, Anabaptists, Phrenologists, must have its periodical, its monthly or quarterly magazine, hanging out like its windmill … to grind meal for society.
The Information Explosion, Then and Now

Samuel Johnson, 1753: The present age… may be styled, with great propriety, the Age of Authors; for, perhaps, there was never a time when men of all degrees of ability, of every kind of education, of every profession and employment were posting with ardour so general to the press….The province of writing was formally left to those who, by study of appearance of study, were supposed to have gained knowledge unattainable to the busy part of mankind.
The Information Explosion, Then and Now

Average number of book titles published annually in Britain: (probably bad estimates)

- 1666-1756: < 100
- 1790-1800: c. 350
- 1810-1820: c. 600

Annual sale of newspapers:

- 1750: 7 million
- 1810: 24 million

Increase in number of printed genres

- Eighteenth Century: Earliest appearance of printed posters, theater bills, newspapers, handbills, labels, tickets, marriage certificates, papers of indenture, receipts, etc.
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Moral: An exponential curve looks just as scary wherever you get on board.